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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sign Ordinance Aimed At Alcohol Use by Young Adults In Two Florida Counties

The Lake County Citizens Committee for Alcohol Health Warnings thanks *Public Health Reports* for its November-December 1988 issue, which has been a help to us in the past year in the alcohol health warnings effort. Our experience with the effort may be of interest to your readers involved in similar community efforts.

Beginning September 15, 1986, a City of Leesburg (FL) ordinance required the posting of a health warning sign at all alcoholic beverage points-of-sale. This was the first comprehensive (broader than birth defects only) health warning sign required by law in any city in the United States. The sign is now required at all alcoholic beverage points-of-sale in Lake and Citrus Counties, in 20 or more cities and towns. Efforts are in progress for sign ordinances in three larger counties, Hillsborough (Tampa), Marion (Ocala), and Dade (Miami).

Posted at every alcohol point-of-sale, the sign is exposed to everyone who shops for food and beverages, about 95 percent of the families in any community. During the past 3 years, in our test cities, the sign has proved its effectiveness in generating awareness, attitude change, and behavior change; and it has proved its cost efficiency, using the basic media coverage yardsticks of reach, frequency, and cost-per-thousand potential readers. The sign is now endorsed for statewide use by the Florida State Health Office, Florida Medical Association, Florida Public Health Association, and Florida Dietetic Association.

The text is based on the preventive education recommendations of the National Council on Alcoholism. Because we aim the message at young people, including young women of child-bearing age, we omitted the mature drinkers' long-term hazards of cirrhosis, heart disease, and cancer. We did not limit our warning to birth defects, because to do so would fail to recognize drunk

driving; addiction, the most persistent alcohol hazard; and juvenile problem drinking. The ordinances behind the sign have not been challenged, and there have been no code enforcement problems.

To keep code enforcement simple, the county health departments, as part of routine inspection of food-serving establishments (including supermarkets and convenience stores with deli and sandwich services), will report any sign deficiencies to the code enforcement officer. The sign is laminated to make it immune to window-washer stains and keep it neat for years.

The effectiveness of the sign, as a preventive education medium, has been proven, using standard research procedures.

Awareness. Within 3 months of its posting, the sign had been seen by 49 percent of Leesburg High School seniors; within another 6 months, awareness of the sign among LHS seniors had increased to 67 percent. Among mothers in the Lake County Health Department's Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC Program), sign awareness reached 63 percent within 4 months.

Positive attitude change. Among LHS seniors who had seen the sign, 71 percent said they would like additional information about health hazards. Among WIC mothers who had seen the sign, 82 percent said they would like additional information about alcohol health hazards.

Behavior change. As a basic component in two comprehensive alcohol awareness and education programs, the health warning sign has contributed to these results. (a) Lake/Sumter Mental Health Center and Hospital reports a 12 percent gain, from 1 year ago, in voluntary (other than court-ordered) self-referrals. (b) Lake County Health Department reports that more than 50 percent of its WIC mothers now abstain from alcohol during pregnancy, against a national average of 30 percent.

Efficiency. Efficiency of the sign was determined as a basic element in a community alcohol awareness and education program. Cost of a laminated sign is 78 cents. Coverage, at the point-of-sale, can reach about 95 percent of total population. In two Publix Supermarkets, the signs reach 12,000 shoppers per week in Leesburg and 18,000 per week in Eustis. Store traffic figures are not available for the many convenience stores where most of the high school seniors and WIC mothers saw the sign.

Principal credit for the success of the sign goes to June M. Atkinson, MD, Director, Lake County Health Department. Dr. Atkinson was the first supporter of the local citizens action group. She made the first layout for the sign on her desktop computer, served as the key witness in presentations to city and county governments, and obtained the endorsements of Florida's top health

authorities. She also rallied her colleagues to the support of the local point-of-sale sign, which we adopted 3 years ago, after our State legislature rejected our request (the first at any State level) for warning labels on containers. The activists who started sign action in Citrus, Marion, and Hillsborough Counties are all associates of Dr. Atkinson in the county health department system.

The local citizens action group consists of the directors of public health and mental health, the sheriff and several police chiefs, educators, and church leaders. We have based our effort on issues of public health and public safety, with special stress on health.

David Cleary, 32113 Elizabeth Ave., Tavares, FL 32778.

The text of the alcohol point-of-sale sign required in Lake and Citrus Counties follows.

HEALTH WARNING: Alcohol in beer, wine, and liquor can cause intoxication, addiction, and birth defects. Reduce your risks: do not drink before driving or operating machinery. Do not mix alcohol with other drugs (it can be fatal). Do not drink during pregnancy. Endorsed by: Florida State Health Office, Florida Medical Association, Florida Public Health Association, Florida Dietetic Association.

Readers are encouraged to contribute Letters to the Editor, commenting briefly on specific articles or other items appearing in the journal. Letters should be suitable for publication, in 500 words or less, with not more than 10 references, and directed to Letters to the Editor, Public Health Reports, Parklawn 13C-26, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857. The editor will give authors of articles referred to in a letter an opportunity to respond.